

The Search for Order in American Society

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"Yet once more, O Ye laurels, yet once more, O Ye myrtles brown..." Once any schoolboy would have recognized the convention, if not the necessity for an apostrophe to the Muse. Now we address others out of the authority of our egos, relying entirely upon circumstances and our introspective autonomy. Today this attitude towards man and the cosmos is common to all occupations.

Such heresy would have appalled the Greco-Roman world. The classical poet, statesman, or general would have averted his eyes from one so recklessly defiant of the Fates — from one so publicly impious. Even centuries later, Milton, among other poets, felt the need to rely upon something beyond talent and skill.

It was more than a convention among the ancients. To tamper with the Fates, more powerful than the gods, involved the matter of hubris both in life and the arts. Greek tragedies, those that have come down to us, are dramatic renditions of what pride, concretely, can do to human beings, either by one human to another, or by the distant intervention of the Fates in their own ugly shapes or by the gods. There is no more poignant appeal than that of the child Iphigenia saying, "But what have I done? Whip me if I've done wrong." This brutal sacrifice of a daughter by her father to further his ambition would make even the keys of a computer sigh.

— It is impossible to write a tragedy today. Man has become a hostage to society. As hostage he no longer is responsible for himself or for his acts. Either the family or living conditions are asked to take the blame. Sometimes it is the mother's milk that has soured in him, and he never did no good. Or he becomes a criminal, since he has not gotten all the material things advertisement makes him feel are his birthright. Women often are his special victims. By the time the Press takes over, there are so many crimes and the details are repeated so often (always modified by the word "alleged") that, like a piece of music being killed, the crime ceases to have an actuality in the reader's mind. Through mass media we receive everything filtered through distant views; so that vital actions are becoming more and more abstract, until one person suffers, and then it is too late to comprehend.

Without a tragic sense there is no moral sense, and without a moral sense, violence, uncontrollable and meaningless, rots what is left of institutional society. You can put two policemen on every

street and a judge on every block, but without a sense of what is right or wrong, crime becomes the normal state and criminals walk the streets because the courts are crowded. In the crystalized stage of civilization, that of the world cities, to use a Spenglerian term, "forms harden, roots of the organic units of the state are lifted into the shallow pots of a Garden of Adonis, where they bloom shortly and die, removed from a rich continuous earth."

Richard Weaver's book, *Ideas Have Consequences*, makes a profound analysis of the predicament the Western world finds itself in. He picks the twelfth century and the Realist-Nominalist controversy as the time Christendom made the wrong decision. Occam's razor cut off the sustaining universals and put the truth in the individual mind, and that meant ultimately dependence upon experience. As Joseph Campbell says, "theology was abandoned in favor of psychology." I would like to add that without any absolute set of values to which action can be referred, and Weaver agrees, experience is largely that of sensation. There is the oft - " learn from experience." That is the one thin ou cannot do. We may suffer or delight in experience, but since we never have the same kind twice, that is, experience that is exact enough to permit generalization, we see at once how ideas have consequences. As a corollary to this, the word "Modern" replaces the word "Christian." It is like the elastic on an old woman's drawers. It will fit a sha e. It is closely allied to Progress, that Whig word which makes an advance in time necessar- il rovement over the past, merel because it is the latest thing. Nobody seems to remember Queen Elizabeth's "progresses," those month-long visits to powerful lords. When she left their domains, she left them bankrupt and harmless. But to speak of modern man is self-deluding. There is no such being. At what time of the day or night does the natural man turn modern? At twelve o'clock? Two minutes after midnight? Now? Yesterday? I offer in our predicament a more exact word. The "momentary" man; that man who no longer has location, who is forever on his way, speeding from one inn to another, to the same bed that is not the same bed, to poor cuisines served in the same false ornament of supposedly foreign architecture. And because of the failure of our educational system, nobody recognizes the falsity of the Spanish rococo, or the French provincial bedroom suite.

I'm not going to bring coals to Newcastle and summarize Weaver's philosophical and learned argument. I am entirely in agreement. I am an artist, and it happens that I prefer the truths of mythology to those of dialectics, not in any way believing that they

disagree, but that they occupy different parts of the mind. As a myth of pertinent relevancy for us today as in the past, I am going to explore a little the Garden of Eden. Many think that legends and myths of the ancient world come from Sumeria, presumably the first cultural kingdom to emerge from the mists of time. This is mostly speculation, and so must be the possibility that it is from the tales of Sumeria that our Garden of Eden derives. The J writer, to whom many biblical scholars ascribe the second account in Genesis of the Garden, left out a most interesting detail: Adam's first wife, Lilith. Now, she was a good girl. When she ran away, it took four angels to catch and hold her. She must have been a destructive part of the Mother goddess, until the masculine triumph in Heaven left her out of the Hebrew canon and she sank into oral legend. So, it came about that the Hebrew patriarchs, as well as Christendom, accepted the J writer's story of the beginning of things. Nor should the cogency of its meaning be lost to us now, especially one aspect of the Garden's drama. (I make this seemingly obvious point, since I find that one difficulty in teaching is the students know scarcely anything of the Bible or ancient history or the myths and fables of the classical world, as well as not knowing how to spell or construct a sentence.)

Let me summarize. The all-unknowable, un-namable, invisible power we refer to as God, for His ineffable reason, assumed a limitation. He became a Creator, that is an artist, and in six days made the cosmos within which we abide. Like all artists, at the end of a masterpiece He needed a rest. But to rest there must be a place agreeable enough to rest in. And so He made a garden where He could walk in the cool of the day. He made all the herbs and growing things. He experimented with animals, the crawling things, and those that had wings. Wherever He looked, up or down, before or around him, He saw that his artifacts were good. In the midst of all this brilliant performance, alas, the Creator got lonesome. Apparently He had not expected this. So He then made out of the dirt of the Garden an artifact in His own image and called him Adam.

All forms are contained in that part of the mind known as the imagination. All forms, when substantially completed, make an image, and this image is a symbol of a certain quality or act. This is the basic authority for the guidance of all craftsmen, and for the definition of what a craft is.

Naturally, all forms find themselves in the mind of God, else chaos would have persisted in its Uroboric inertia. Since man is made in the image of God, he has inherited this state of cognition, although no man can truly be said to create. Only God can breathe

life into matter. All man as artist can do is imitate out of his private talent and vision the action and phenomena already established.

As Potentate of the Garden it was not God's intention to make Adam into an artist. What He needed was a gardener. Some will say that gardeners have many crafts. Be that as it may, the Garden needed to be tended by one with attributes sufficient to consort with the Landlord in his leisure moments. To be able to look after the flora and all growing things, Adam needed a limited power, with the emphasis on limited, that is a power sufficient only to his office. Anybody who has ever farmed knows that cattle and hogs can get in a corn field and ruin it, or crows pluck corn deep out of the ground. So God called before Adam all the birds of the air, the beasts of the fields, the things that crawled, and had him name them. And what Adam called them, they were called. Adam also named Eve. Now, to name is to have power over what is named. Primitive tribesmen know this. They will never tell their true names to a foreigner. And nobody knows the name of God.

Notice that God, master of the cosmos and landlord of the Garden, its core, did not ask Adam to name the flora. The flora was there before Adam was made, containing along with the rest of the universe the mystery which it represented. To make clear to Adam his limits, God forbade him, as we know, to eat of the tree whose fruit contained a juice only the gods could digest: good and evil; those opposites whose balance ordered the motion of things. There was another tree at the center of the Garden God was careful not to mention: the tree of life. Be content, He was implying, with using and looking after all growing things, but make no effort to explore or investigate the secrets of life or of the surrounding firmament. All the while, Eve, standing at the side of Adam and a little back, with her eyes cast demurely upon the ground, was listening to the admonition. Now the ground is the natural habitat of the serpent. No doubt Eve saw him wink and crawl away, towards the trees at the center of the Garden. Else how would she have known which tree was which?

Now the artist must not only look at his artifact and see that it is good. He must also be surprised by what he has done, far more than he set out to do. This is the secret of the master stroke that pulls all of it together and sets it forth as the masterpiece it is. Such distinguishes the work of an artist from the formula. H₂O must always be water and not occasionally carbolic acid. The very thing that makes the formula work for a science makes it inane and dull for fiction. Or verse. It leaves out, as John Crowe Ransom argues in *God Without Thunder*, contingency. Well, the Creator discovered that the juice of

the apple had a most disturbing quality for the peace of the Garden. (This is always the risk the artist takes.) Concealed behind the smooth skin of the fruit were the laws of nature, more particularly appetite, the appeal of which to his creatures God foresaw at once, in the entire range of its implications. Indiscriminate appetite would replace the Garden of Innocence, or the suspension of life, however you call it, with a cannibal wilderness. Appetite is not only carnal. That is vexing enough. There was also in the knowledge of good and evil an appetite for unrestrained power. This would change all the rules of the game. This was no threat to God's power. The threat was to the well-being of His creatures.

Not disobedience, but the sorrow of chaos's return is the lesson the myth of the Garden has for mankind. We of the West have rushed to misconstrue its warnings. The moment the European mind accepted materialism as the *summum bonum*, that is the dirt of the ground without the breath of God upon it, it initiated the repetitive catastrophes of Babel. The confusion of tongues is the prelude to downfall. It describes excessive specialization which reaches the stage where no master craftsman can interpret the disparate groups of skills upon which a state must stand.

We all think we know how it came out. Certainly the Garden would be no place where God could any longer walk in the cool of the day. In His quandary all He could think to do was forbid Adam to eat of that particular tree. He did not mention at first the tree of life. Now the subtlest beast of the field, the serpent with the speaking head, knew that Adam was obedient, and he spoke to Eve only in the most general terms about good and evil. He did emphasize what he thought she would like—to live in the highest fashion. The irony lies just there. She and Adam were already living as the gods, without any of the crushing responsibility and knowledge of what that meant.

The first result of this great change found the intimacy between God and His creatures diminished. He took to high places and spoke out of whirlwinds, and Adam and his family found themselves wayfarers in this world. But in the wilderness of their exile these creatures did not forget their genesis: they were made in the image of their Creator. If they had been cast out to suffer the laws of nature, they could take comfort in the knowledge of their heritage. No matter how disguised it might become, they partook of their Divine ancestry. The proof of this on the man's part was an innate need to make things. Nothing he could do would so nourish his spirit as working at some craft. This gave him a limited power over nature and freed him from nature's most pitiless law, cannibalism. With children, Eve dis-

covered she had a family, and this made bearable the sorrow of birth. She also discovered that a family has to eat, and fairly regularly. No cook with many skills likes to keep moving about; so gradually, to skip eons of time, cultures and civilizations be an to appear, and they mostly were based on the family as the unit of the community. Christendom's structure was just this. Every man was a craftsman from the lord to the peasant, and every person belonged to some kind of family. Manners and mores defined the forms and laws of society. Weaver reminds us that the French mark for civilization is etiquette and good food, which they limit to themselves and the Chinese.

It is not in the French nature to hide any light, no matter how dim, under a bushel. Be that as it may, a traditional cuisine, composed of culinary crafts, the basic ones inherited, does two things to stabilize society. It demands good manners, and this restrains appetite and thus makes for the etiquette of the table, which in turn makes for a respectful savoring of the dishes served, good conversation, and a celebration of a social amity among the diners. It maintains leisure, which gives pause for reflection, upon which the arts and, for the last four hundred years, history had depended. Memory, through recollection, into song, I believe is the classic inheritance the Western world has abandoned in its reduction of man to his physical dimensions. But I can give you a more homely example. The taste and odor of the family victuals, which has the common taste of a province or region, binds the solitary to the family and the family to a place. Wander I don't care how far, or how well you eat exotic or strange foods, there will come a time when you hunger to eat some family dish or bread. It is usually bread. When I was a boy in Paris, I would have given a hundred dollars for a hoecake and a mess of turnip greens with two poached eggs on top and marinated onions on the side. But it was the bread I longed for.

A good cuisine does a second thing. It respects the fruits, vegetables and meats it uses. It does not take from nature these gifts for mere survival, which is the economy of eating today what you get today, with no thought of tomorrow. It receives these gifts ceremonially and, at times, with ritual care. That of course is the traditional society, one maintained hierarchically and hieratically. It accepts the curse, that we all live, man, beast, fowl, fish, and herb, in a cannibal world. Only by ceremony and ritual a common respect for all living things, can we mitigate, make bearable, the knowledge of how we live. The Indians, the most religious and conservative of peoples, made peace with nature. In hunting they always asked permission of the deer or the bear before they killed it. And since their clans took

the names of animals, there was no indiscriminate slaughter until we arrived upon the scene.

We taught the Indians our habits: make war on nature. Our retribution appeared in the form of the Momentary Man, who obliterates both time and space, living in the sensation of the moment or the suspension of every one but that of the monotony of speed. His table is the cafeteria, food without ceremony, where the solitary never dines, only eats.

I have a feeling I am stating platitudes. But when I try to elevate the tone, I wonder about the role of a male Cassandra. The eyes of thirty are not the eyes of seventy. At thirty the landscape looked familiar. It no longer does. Wherever you went, you were aware that families composed the community, in town or country. There were enough family-sized farms and private ownership of business to balance the abstract corporations of industry. Automobiles travelled the roads and turnpikes, but the roads were bad enough to restrain the disruption of families. The Agrarian position was this: if this country could only keep the equilibrium between capitalism, or the propertied state, and finance corporate industry (without which some foreign power might take us over) we would continue to lead a better life. It was business with actual owners in control *or* abstract corporations ruled by managers and dominated by what John Taylor of Caroline County, Virginia, called the paper and patronage aristocracy. This last was the genesis of all totalitarian societies, that is servile states, and it doesn't matter whether they are called Communism, Fascism, or Democracy.

But I don't want to go over the Agrarian proposals. These can be found in print. It was never a movement. We wrote with our backs to the wall by way of protest. It was the dramatic 1929 crash which made us seem to be prophets. Indeed, it has turned out that we were. None of us thought it could be as bad as it has come to be.

Richard Weaver was at Vanderbilt long enough to be influenced by the ideas generated there. His proposal for salvation—it is no less than that—is restoration of private property and the forms of language, and ultimately of Literature. Certainly he was one of the first to show the need of purifying language. Words mean what they say. When they do not properly express meaning, communion is on the way to being lost. In the nineteen thirties language was not so obviously threatened. More men knew then who they were. There was an eagerness to volunteer for the First World War. This was not so obvious in the Second World War, and the last one was advertised by its deserters. Men volunteer when they have something to lose,

especially something they believe in and love.

The ingrained need for property is not yet totally lost, but without a proper understanding of language the proprietor will be hard put to defend it, and his enjoyment will be curtailed. And this is where a proper education comes in. A proper education would be as near like the old Liberal Arts as is possible today. It would introduce its scholars to the various areas of learning. It would discipline the mind, so that the graduate can perform in diverse circumstances. And the mind would flourish because it would be a poetic mind, that is, it would have a constant view of the wholeness of things.

Such a program would return us to an aristocratic education, literally the *aristos Krateo*, the rule of the best. It would take bold and intelligent young people to enter such a curriculum. They will have to learn how to restrain the mass media they were brought up on. It's been my experience that the best of the young are eager to learn, just as they are quick to despise and ignore the spurious. As graduates of such a training they would have a larger knowledge and a belief in something outside themselves. And it just might be that, returning home, they with their sense of order, would find those who are lost turning to them for guidance. The communities less and less are representing what a community should be. They may help them to recuperate. This all will take time, but in a crisis the effects of such an education would proliferate.

Literature can never take the place of a commonly accepted and practiced belief in religion, but we must not forget that the Word was a creative power of God, and that it was made flesh in Christ. To want to restore a lost faith will not restore it. But in a materialistic and secular world, language and literature, and the richness of language is literature, seem to me the best if not the only way to rescue us from the rapid advance of a confusion of tongues. This knowledge will clear our eyes, allow us to see that we who have thought of ourselves as rich have only been profligate, and that our progress has been the progress of Hogarth's heir. Then instead of the habit of gluttonous appetite, safety and comfort, we may know again faith, hope and charity. But we will not know them until we correct our distortions by a sober reconsideration of the natural virtues: justice, prudence, temperance and fortitude. ☆